“The concept of work-force Diversity is no longer an abstraction; it is a part of everyday life in many countries in the developed world.”

SHRM “Global Diversity and Inclusion: Perceptions, Practices and Attitudes” - 2009

Nowhere does the above quote hold more true, than in the Middle East, and in particular, the Gulf (GCC) region. Diversity for many Middle Eastern HR professionals is viewed as an almost effortless achievement, resulting more from the diverse talent pool that exists in the market, than from targeted HR initiatives. “We don’t have to try for Diversity, because it is just there” may as well be the motto for many employers in the region. But while many employers in the Middle East are quick to acknowledge the cultural melting pot they have at the workplace, very few of them focus intensively on making sure that the members of this melting pot are, in fact interacting effectively with each other regardless of their nationality, background or other differentiating characteristics.

Diversity initiatives have largely become seen as trendy initiatives promoted primarily in the West, focusing on familiar concepts such as ‘tolerance’, ‘sensitivity’ and ‘acceptance’. In the past decade, there has been an acutely heightened focus on diversity through diversity think tanks, boutique consultancies, magazines, and books. It is now recognized as being an extremely important and crucial driver for company success. For example, results of Aon Hewitt’s flagship study, Top Companies for Leaders™ show that 84% percent of the organizations identified as being Top Companies for Leaders globally, formally work towards increasing the diversity in their leadership group as part of their leadership strategy. These organizations make conscious efforts to build an inclusive workplace by promoting cultural agility, global mindsets and diverse backgrounds.
But when examining diversity practices and employee opinions in the Middle East, a region inherently mixed in terms of its workforce, the research findings are at the least, surprising, and to a greater extent, worrisome. Despite the positive effects of policies and regulations in recent years that aim to increase diversity (like female participation in the workforce by promoting work-life balance, and also reducing gender restrictions in the workplace), countries in the Middle East continue to be rated the lowest in terms of tolerance to diversity. For example, in SHRM’s quantitative survey Global Diversity Readiness Index, it was a GCC country that ranked last out of a total of 47 otherwise non-GCC countries. Additionally, when using results from Aon Hewitt’s regional flagship study - Qudurat to examine employee tolerance to diversity across various demographics, GCC Nationals show significantly lower tolerance to diversity as compared to their expatriate counterparts. Furthermore the study showed that the younger the employees, the less tolerant they are towards diversity. This is surprising to most employers who expect the younger generation entering the workforce to be more exposed and accustomed to a diverse environment than the previous generations.

What effect could these statistics have on the currently employed workforce in GCC, for example, or worse still, on the potential workforce that the GCC countries are trying to attract? And even if organizations agree to start prioritizing diversity, and tolerance towards diversity in particular, this still isn’t enough in ensuring the diversity gets utilized in a way that is actually beneficial for business results.

In Aon Hewitt terms, “Diversity is the mix. Inclusion is making the mix work”. As Andre Tapas states in Aon Hewitt’s article, Sustainable Diversity: Ensuring Diversity’s Staying Power: “While getting the mix is extremely hard, making the mix work is harder. The key to making the mix work—inclusion—is for the entire system to nurture and enable the mix”.

Traditional diversity initiatives aim at influencing attitudes and opinions employees have of “the other”. These initiatives that organizations implement typically includes a laundry list of do’s and don’ts with the ultimate aim being ‘tolerant’ and ‘sensitive’ towards “the others” in the workplace. However, in order to build systemic change within an organization, it is important to build basic, underlying skills and competencies which we refer to as “cross-cultural competence”. This is the ability to discern and take into account one’s own and others’ world views, to be able to solve problems, make decisions, and resolve conflicts in ways that optimize cultural differences for better, longer-lasting, and more creative solutions.

Cultural world views can be shaped by any number of diversity dimensions and not just nationality. These dimensions include gender, generation, race/ethnicity, personality, and so on. The new paradigm in developing one’s cross-cultural competence focuses on equipping employees with the skills and abilities to effectively understand and deal with a range of these world views, thus promoting a more holistic and sustainable approach to inclusion.

**What capabilities do organizations need to build in their workforce to make them cross-culturally competent i.e. ‘make the mix work?’**

Through our research, we have come to recognize that at different levels of the organization, different levels of cross-cultural competence are expected from employees. The four stages of cross-cultural competence, which reflect a development in learning and personal experience as one moves upwards in scope of responsibility in the organization, are as follows:
Aon Hewitt has various interventions targeted at building each of the four levels of competence, and these are customized further in discussion with our clients to meet the unique requirements of the organization/group.

**What does this mean for HR?**

Cross-Cultural Competence based interventions equip individuals and teams to become more self-aware of their own world views, and understand the world view of others. Using cross-cultural competence, employers are able to embed cross-cultural competence development into performance management systems for maximum, sustainable impact; recruiters are better able to avoid mis-reading a potential candidate’s lack of eye contact or modest description of his or her achievements; managers are better able to discern between a performance issue and a cross-cultural misunderstanding; sales professionals are better equipped to sell to, and negotiate with, those who are culturally different. All this contributes to an authentic environment of inclusion, which is essential for ensuring an organization not only recognize the diversity of its workforce, but maximizes the return from this workforce in a global economy.

In the Middle East, organizations can no longer take diversity for granted. Even if a diverse work-force continues to exist, organizations need to realize that they need to do much, much more to ensure that they are contributing to an authentic environment of inclusion, through equipping an organization’s people, processes, and structures to take into account the deepest implications of a diverse workforce. By developing cross-cultural competence, organizations in the Middle East, and in the GCC in particular, would be able to create more powerful and inclusive practices, therefore making the most out of the unique potential that this region has to offer.
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